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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000396

SIPDIS

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TAGS: AJ IR KISL PGOV PHUM PREL

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: DESTRUCTION OF YASAMAL DISTRICT MOSQUE

REF: BAKU 360

Classified By: Political-Economic Section Chief Rob Garverick for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On 26-27 April 2009, the Yasamal District Executive Authority (YDEA) and the District Police destroyed a newly constructed mosque in Baku. As noted reftel, several journalists were harassed while documenting the event. The leader of the Yasamal District religious community, Mir Valeh Movsumov, acquired the majority of the land on which the mosque was built in 2005 and began construction with the blessing of the State Religious Committee for Work with Religious Structures (SCWRS) and the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB). The reason behind the destruction of the mosque appears to be economic rather than ideological, in that both the neighboring Economic University and the YDEA allegedly have interest in the property. End summary.

¶2. (C) On 21 April 2009, POLOFF met with Mir Valeh Movsumov, head editor of the Baku affiliate of newspapers Kommersant and Argumenti i Fakti, and owner of the property on which the mosque was erected. Movsumov purchased the land and constructed the mosque in order to contribute to the cultural heritage of Azerbaijan; he does not portray himself as a religious figure or a religious ideologue. Movsumov showed copies of acquisition of the land, registration with the SCWRS, and support of the head of the CMB, Sheik-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade (the Islamic religious authority in Azerbaijan). According to Movsumov, construction proceeded without problem until the fall of 2008, when the new head of the YDEA claimed that the construction was illegal. The YDEA filed a suit against the mosque, and, in October 2008, the Yasamal District Court issued a verdict to destroy the mosque. As of the time of the meeting with Movsumov, the countersuit filed by the religious community was still being considered.

¶3. (C) In terms of why the mosque was targeted, there are two theories, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Movsumov opined that a new, high-rise building was under construction nearby, and the presence of the mosque impeded the ability to incorporate the mosque's property into the construction project. Additionally, Movsumov noted that the neighboring Economic University laid claim to nine square meters of the land (where the minaret was actually built). Movsumov said that he had obtained the University's oral permission to build on the disputed land, for which Movsumov never obtained written documentation. In spite of the oral agreement, the Economic University complained about the construction on the disputed area.

¶4. (C) On 30 March 2009, the YDEA destroyed some ornaments

around the mosque as well as the fence surrounding the mosque. On 26 and 27 April, the YDEA destroyed the entire structure. The embassy attempted to contact the Baku Mayor,s office, which, after five days, referred the embassy to the YDEA.

¶5. (C) Comment: While there is no indication that the mosque was targeted for its religious affiliation, the destruction of the mosque surely serves to deny would-be worshippers a place to gather. Symbolically, in spite of the denouncement of the destruction of the mosque by the head of the CMB, the possible targeting of the mosque for its religious affiliations cannot be dismissed. However, the embassy has heard before that the district executive authorities are extremely powerful organizations that, in practice, are not even subordinate to the mayor,s office. The extent to which the national government either ordered or was aware of the mosque,s destruction is not known. However, the idea that the head of the YDEA could financially benefit from the property, and, as such, the YDEA invoked a puppet legal process to gain control of the area and did so with the approval of the Presidential Administration is not unrealistic to us.

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